

Second Wind

on the Way of Saint James

A NOVEL



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Second Wind on the Way of St. James

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Second Wind is a work of fiction. Many experiences of the authors on the Camino have inspired and informed themes of the book, but people and events depicted are products of the authors' imaginations; any resemblance to real persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

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Episode 1

Prologue and First Steps



La Cruz de Ferro

Wednesday, June 16

Snarky conclusions? Virginal heights? I never should have thrown those words at her. I guess I've failed one more time at the relationship thing. She's my best hope for figuring out the rest of my life, and I may have blown it. I should have kept my mouth shut.

He stuffed his sleeping bag into its sack, stowed the rest of his gear, hoisted the pack onto his back, and started toward the *albergue's* porch to wait for Helen, who had showered after him.

Helen joined him without a word. Yesterday she had spotted a little place where she wanted to have breakfast, and the morning was still quite dark as they walked to it. Bert was not looking forward to their conversation.

Breakfast went better than he expected, however. He was surprised and relieved that she never brought it up. They talked about the day's route. They drank their coffee and ate their *tortillas españolas* as if last night never happened. That was fine with him, and pretty much typical of them, he thought. Ignore the snags and after a while they sort of go away.

When they stepped out after breakfast, the sun was low and bright. Their shadows walked ahead of them on the trail, leading them across an open field.

The light was striking. It spilled like liquid gold across the panorama. A crumbling stone wall with an opening that used to be a window caught the light just ahead to their right. His eye followed the field down the hill to the left of the ruin and then up to the snowcapped mountains in the distance. He couldn't remember ever having seen light like this before.

He expected following the trail up to the Cruz de Ferro to be a struggle, even without the snarky comments hanging over them. Their first miles of the day would bring them over the highest point on the Camino Francés – higher even than where it crosses the Pyrenees or at O'Cebrero in the Cordillera Cantábrica. But the ascent was reasonably gentle. The golden light softened the edges of the climb, as well as of the scenery and his mood.

He began scanning the pine-covered horizon to the west, looking for the cross. Finally it appeared, perhaps a quarter of a mile ahead, a thin column over the treetops. The sun illuminated the scene like a floodlight with a pale gold filter.

A short distance beyond, they broke out of the curtain of trees that had been shielding the lower parts of the

cross, and it suddenly came into full view. The tall wooden pole reached up out of a huge mound of rocks. It looked bronze in the morning's light. Closer still, they were able to make out the namesake iron cross on the top of the pole. Colorful streamers and ribbons were attached to the lower part, as high as people could reach. The banners waved in a steady cool breeze, their blues, reds, and greens disrupting the yellow sun-drenched glow.

While still in the distance, they saw people climbing up on the rock pile to reach the base of the cross.

In his jacket pocket, Bert felt the crab apple-size stone he had picked up yesterday. How had they managed to walk almost three hundred and fifty miles and thirty days before learning of one of the most repeated bits of Camino lore? When they finally heard that people carry a stone symbolically loaded with their troubles and leave it at the iron cross, they'd each decided to give it a try. He loaded last night's spat onto his.

He looked ahead at the huge rock pile. He liked the idea that it was made up of small stones carried up here by untold numbers of people. He fingered his stone thinking, ruefully, that it wasn't so much the troubles of the past that he wanted to leave behind. Rather it was the troubles lying ahead – in the abyss – that weighed on him. Could adding a stone to the rock pile do anything about those troubles? Maybe he shouldn't be leaving a stone on

the pile, but instead taking one and keeping it with him until he had worked things out.

They reached the open, park-like area around the cross. People were climbing up singly or in groups. It was a major photo-op, and he guessed that few come away from the spot without a picture. Friends on the ground, or perhaps strangers pressed into service, clicked away. Atop the mound, some people looked joyful for the camera, while others placed their stones with quiet reverence.

He and Helen found a picnic table off to the side a bit. They sat next to each other, resting from the walk and taking in the scene. The Cruz de Ferro was not a place to rush by. They seemed to have decided this without even needing to discuss it.

Bert felt Helen's attention on two men waiting to climb to the pole. The first went up, touched the pole, kissed his stone, placed it gently on the pile, and came back down with tears flowing on his ruddy cheeks. The second man stood with him a moment with an arm around his shoulder, then climbed to place his stone. Bert looked over to Helen and saw a tear in her eye. It made him want to put an arm around her. Instead he looked away, not wanting to embarrass her.

Soon they were ready to take their turns. Helen went up first. He got a good photo of her, arms outstretched, smiling broadly, short brown hair blowing in the wind.

She looked triumphant and happy. Maybe she hadn't taken last night's words as seriously as he feared.

When it was his turn, he climbed the steep pile of loose rocks, feeling them slip under foot. Were other climbers this unsteady? As he reached the top and took out his stone, he noticed the many objects littering the place. Stones were in abundance, of course. Other mementos included messages written on the banners and streamers affixed to the pole, bits of paper wrapped with ribbons, a tiny teddy bear wearing glasses, and a stuffed angel named Jen, according to the tag on her wing. There was even a pack of cigarettes – a good burden to leave behind, he thought.

Ready to position his stone, he forced his stiff, reluctant body to bend over. Then he noticed something out of place, even in this eclectic mix. It looked like a wallet, and Bert's first assumption was that it must have been dropped by one of the men they had just seen. If so, he could try to catch up with him and return it. Or he could leave it at an *albergue*, and the grapevine network might link it up with the owner.

He picked it up. It was plastic and seemed weather-beaten. Had it been out in the open for long, or was it just old and worn? Opening it, he found that it contained neither cash nor credit cards, but only a folded scrap of paper. Unfolding it, he read the words written in a large, shaky hand.

Peregrino

Solamente tú puedes salvar su propia vida

Ultreia!

He stared at the words, understanding their meaning almost at once, despite his rudimentary Spanish.

Was this message intended for him? How could that be? But it felt like it was. There was a lot of talk about the magic of the Camino, but he didn't expect it would show itself like this.

And yet, as if magically, the message opened a door in his mind.

He had a fleeting thought that Helen might have left it for him to find. She had gone up before him. But her Spanish wasn't good enough even for that simple message. And the style of the script had a definite European cast to it. Besides, it just didn't seem like something she would say to him.

He looked at it again and then, looking toward the ground, saw others waiting to take their places on the rock pile. Folding the paper and sliding it into the wallet, he put it back where he had found it.

"What were you doing up there?" said Helen, when he was back on the ground.

He couldn't imagine how to tell her what had changed. He was convinced she wouldn't understand. "Oh, it was just that . . . something that looked like a wallet caught my eye. But it was something else. We can talk about it later . . . maybe by the time we get to Santiago. It's hard to explain . . . really hard. And I'm ready to get walking again now."

She didn't press, which surprised him a little.

He wondered if he would find a way to explain it to her, even by the time they got to Santiago.

Putting on their backpacks, they retrieved their walking poles, and started along the wide path down from Monte Irigo.

Months Earlier

Sandpine Key, Florida

January

She knew she was clutching the phone too tightly. He answered before the third ring. She was sitting in the overstuffed reading chair next to her bed, where she'd plopped down and picked up the phone the minute she got home. She hadn't even waited to get out of her uniform. The dogs were hovering, probably wondering why they hadn't gotten their usual after-work treats.

"Well, Bert, how'd it go?" The meeting with his cardiologist had been much anticipated.

"I don't have to go back for six months. Practically a clean bill of health. He said I'm good to go for most normal activities. Of course I might want to think twice before climbing Mt. Everest or attempting a triathlon. He even said he thinks I'm in better shape than lots of men my age who haven't had heart problems."

She let herself breathe again.

"Fantastic! You must feel like a huge weight has been lifted."

"It's kind of amazing. My life changed for the worse in an eye blink when the aneurism showed up. Then it changed back again with a few words from a doctor.

Things are almost back where they were a year and a half ago . . . Where are you? I hear the dogs.”

“I’m home. Just got here.” She wondered where Bert was and how he looked, not having seen him since he got sick. She imagined him as she’d last seen him on a bright sunlight afternoon with a brisk breeze—sitting tall and lean at the bar table on his back deck, dark hair, trim matching beard with a tad of gray at the sideburns, blue eyes darting after flitting warblers even as he talked to her. The image didn’t fit on a January day in Maryland, she thought. She wondered if he lost much weight through all this. His frame wasn’t so large that he needed to weigh a lot, but he was too tall to drop to 160 or she feared, even less.

“Bert, I am so glad. You must feel great.”

“Funny, but I had a strange mix of feelings. It was completely unexpected. I was leaving the office, and Dr. Webster said now I could get on with living the rest of my life. That was disturbing. After months of thinking about nothing but my touch-and-go heart situation, all of a sudden I have to worry about what to do with the rest of my life! I know I’ll go back to work full-time. But it struck me – it still strikes me – that I have no plans for the rest of my life. Here I am. A doctor just handed me the rest of my life, and I have no inkling of what to do with it.”

“Don’t look at the dark side, Bert. This is a good news day for you. Take my word for it. We’ve been waiting for this for a long time. Enjoy it. I’ll call you in a few days and remind you in case you forget to be happy about it.”

Glancing up at the mirror over the dresser, she noticed a strand of hair out of place and pushed it behind her ear. It was still brown, but now was getting too long. She’d need to schedule an appointment soon.

It was perhaps two hours later when, preparing to make herself a fried egg sandwich for supper, she recalled a conversation she had with Jeanne, a colleague from a Virginia refuge. They were at a training session at the National Conservation Training Center in West Virginia. Jeanne had said something about how the previous summer she and her husband had walked most of a 500-mile trail in Spain. Helen reached for the phone.

“Jeanne, that walk you told me about... You really walked 500 miles? You were kidding, right?” Helen said when her friend picked up the phone. “If that’s not crazy, at least it seems like a very odd vacation – especially at our age.”

Jeanne laughed. “Well, hello to you too, Helen. And how are things going at the North Pass National Wildlife Refuge? All is well here in Virginia. And, oh yes, about the

Camino . . . It wasn't exactly crazy, and it wasn't quite a vacation. But, it *was* doing after fifty what I never would have dreamed of doing in my twenties."

Helen returned Jeanne's laugh. The idea of doing something at this stage in her life that would have seemed too challenging even decades ago was intriguing.

They chatted a bit more, their conversation bouncing around between that walk in Spain and recent events. Jeanne's final words before the call ended were, "The Camino changed our lives."

Those words lodged in Helen's mind as her eggs sizzled in the pan.

Maybe that was what Bert needed – a life-changing experience.

They heard the truck pull into the driveway. Helen was home. Ears raised, heads cocked, they were on alert. It was three days later.

"We're off for a hike, best friends! I have more good news to share. This time it's about me, not Bert. I can hardly believe it happened in the same week."

She was already half out of her brown uniform shirt when she reached the bedroom and grabbed her shorts and Tee-shirt from the closet hook. A minute later, they

were jumping in the front seat of the pickup beside her. She pointed the truck toward their special-hike trail. On the way, she gave them the news.

“I got a call about two hours ago from the Friends of Refuges Society. I’ve been named Refuge Manager of the Year. I’m embarrassed to say I blurted out, ‘How could that be!’ I never should have done that. I hope I didn’t sound as unprofessional to her as I did to me.”

All three of them jumped down into the parking lot, and the dogs waited for Helen to clip on their leashes. Then they turned toward the three-mile loop trail that goes down into a hammock, around a big sinkhole, and up the other side. Like furry bumper cars, the dogs darted off together, trying to surround a bush, one going to each side to scare out whatever was hiding. They pulled her along, barely avoiding a dense thicket of yaupon holly, enjoying the unusual outing and reflecting her excitement. It always amused her to watch them together in the woods. Who would think the two breeds would be a woods sniffing team?

Helen continued her story. They tried to be attentive, in their springer and dachshund ways.

“What a thrill! I feel like I just hit the sky. The community gets visibility, the refuge gets recognition, and I do too. I love this job. I love being responsible for what happens and doesn’t happen in this place. This is why I’m

in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This is why I've worked so hard. This is why I haven't needed to take any vacation days in more than two years. This makes a difference. I am one happy refuge manager! Wahoo! I need to find some special way to celebrate."

Only her four-legged friends and Bert would hear *that* version. She couldn't wait to call him.

Saturday, January 15 10:12 AM
To: helen.morgia@southnet.com
From: bchaz@hometown.net
Subject: Bravo

Helen,

I am so happy about your award! It was great to talk with you. I don't think I came close to saying on the phone how pleased I am that they selected you. You deserve it and more. What excellent news. It has certainly been a good week for us, my friend.

Bert

The Camino just wouldn't let go of Helen's brain. The more she thought about what Jeanne told her about the trek, the less crazy – even strangely appealing – it seemed. Maybe she'd really like to do it too. And, what a special way that would be to celebrate her award!

Finally, she decided to stop toying with the idea and figure out what she would need to do to make it happen. She e-mailed back and forth with Jeanne, getting details and becoming more and more convinced that this was the adventure-filled celebration she wanted. And she knew it would be good for Bert. Now to recruit him to the challenge.

Friday, January 28 6:10 PM
To: bchaz@hometown.net
From: helen.morgia@southnet.com
Subject: Talk tomorrow?

I'm calling you at noon tomorrow, if that works for you. I may need an hour because I plan to talk you into doing something neither of us ever would have dreamed of doing in a million years.

Helen

Bert was even more shocked by the idea than had Helen expected.

After weeks of thinking about the Camino and e-mailing with Jeanne, Helen was well into a planning mode. It was difficult to remember the mental journey that had overcome her initial hesitation.

Bert reacted the way Helen had at first, and was stuck there. She got no vibes from him of intrigue or curiosity. She worried that he might actually not come around.

“Helen, *hello!* This is your friend, Bert, who just spent months of his life training his heart to work right again. You want me to walk five hundred miles – across a whole country – for adventure? What are you thinking?”

His response took her aback. She couldn't think of what to say.

“Well . . . I told you when I e-mailed . . . it was something neither of us would ever have dreamed of doing in an entire lifetime,” she tried.

“I think you're nuts. A great friend, but nuts. Honestly, Helen, you were right—I not only would never have dreamed of doing that in a million years, but in a million years, you could never talk me into doing it.”

Helen swallowed and caught her breath. She was certainly not going to push it after that comment.

“Okay, I hear you Bert. When Jeanne first told me about it, I had a milder version of your reaction. So, I kind of understand. But what happened with me was that the image of doing it just stuck to me and grew more and more intriguing. If Jeanne could do it, why not me? Please will you give the idea a chance? Please will you not push

away any little glimmer of appeal that pokes at you about the possibility?

“I cannot imagine that will happen, Helen. But I promise if it does, I will hold an open mind, like a good scientist trying not to shut out other hypotheses.”

As he said it, she heard his voice drop back down to its normal low, light tone from the high intensity it had when he responded initially.

“If you can bring yourself to do it, take a look at the website of the American Pilgrims on the Camino, Bert,” she said. “It has an amazing amount of data. I’ll continue to hold onto a tiny hope that data will turn your head where my description of the adventure failed to do so.”

“Okay, Helen. We’ll talk in a few days.”

February

Helen hoped Bert would come around, and was not just stalling and putting off giving her a final refusal. He called on Wednesday evening just as she and the dogs returned from their after-work walk.

Always as good as his word, he had read through the website.

“Even for an analytical research guy like me, it had a lot of information,” Bert admitted. “Now I have a much richer appreciation of how crazy this idea of yours is.”

Then he moved to a new tack—from talking her out of the idea, to suggesting he was not the right person to go with her. He was too old to sleep in dormitories with bunk beds. Just the thought of carrying a backpack made his legs hurt. Why not find someone who really wanted to do this and would match her own enthusiasm?

“You’re coming around, Bert,” said Helen. “You just don’t know it yet. I hear you asking the same questions I did before deciding I wanted to do it. Talk to them at your next rehab session, just to be sure. I bet after that you’ll be ready to say yes.”

“Not likely,” he replied. “But okay. I’ll call you on the weekend so you’ll have plenty of time to find somebody else to go with you.”

He called Saturday morning. “Well drat,” he began. “My rehab coach had actually heard of the Camino before and wasted no time in telling me I should do it.”

“Hurrah!” Helen was pleased. She could picture his eyes smiling at her reaction, but also knew his “Drat” was not fully in jest. “Tell me more,” she said. “He didn’t just say go for it, did he?”

“No,” said Bert. He actually said that he thought there wasn’t much more he could do for me. So, the training to get ready and then the walking itself could be just what was needed to put me totally back at the top of my game, so to speak. These rehab types are way too into sports analogies for me,” he complained.

“I’d be better off than most other hikers having worked so hard at my fitness over the past months,” he told me. “Then he added that almost no one dies of exhaustion on the trail. He thought that was funnier than I did.”

“Bert, I am so happy to hear all that. What do you think? Will you consider going with me?”

“I really don’t share your enthusiasm for the challenge,” he replied. “And there is a sticking point I cannot see a way around.”

“I’m listening. I hope I can see the way around,” she said.

“Okay, here it is. The Camino is a pilgrim trail. I can’t imagine you on a pilgrimage. More to the point, given how contentedly unchurched I am, I could never be a pilgrim, Helen.”

“Oh dear, that’s a problem that I too have found almost impossible to deal with. I don’t think I can be a pilgrim, either. But from what Jeanne told me, it’s not a

really a churchy thing. I decided that would have to be enough for me because I so want to try it.”

“Well, it just isn’t enough for me. I can’t be a fake pilgrim for five hundred miles. Let me see what I can learn about the facts of Jeanne’s claim.”

“Thanks Bert, that would be good for both of us.”

Wednesday, February 9 9:13 PM
To: helen.morgia@southnet.com
From: bchaz@hometown.net
Subject: Pilgrims...Not

Helen,

Finally I found some information to address our problem.

Pretending to be a pilgrim was an insurmountable barrier for me. I now see that neither of us would have to do that. Unfortunately this means I may be free to agree to your invitation.

It turns out that, based on its origin, the word pilgrim had a far less restrictive meaning in the beginning than it does currently. The Latin root is commonly translated as ‘foreigners’ or ‘wanderers.’ It is not difficult to see how the name might be applied to strangers showing up in northern Spain in the Middle Ages. Eventually it came to refer not to just any strangers, but specifically to those walking to Santiago.

Well, okay, I can be a wanderer with you, a stranger, or a foreigner. I’ll agree to come if you agree never to call me a pilgrim. Bert

She picked up the phone impulsively the minute she saw his e-mail on her laptop as she was having her morning coffee.

“Yes! Let the adventure begin,” she said when he answered. “Hope I didn’t wake you, Bert, but I just had to call. I went to bed early and didn’t see your message until right now.”

“No, you didn’t wake me. And, I am glad that since I have agreed to come, reluctant though I am, you are pleased to have me along,” he said.

“Thanks Bert. I really wanted to take on this adventure, and to take it on with you. I’ll design us a training schedule and start thinking about what else we need. Talk to you soon.”

They e-mailed and talked on the phone all through the spring, trading impressions about their training and comparing notes on buying all the gear they would need.

Shortly before it was time for them to leave, Helen received another unexpected phone call in the office.

April

“Helen, this is Donald.”

She had met the Assistant Director only once, but knew right away who he was. Use of first names was the norm in the organization.

“Congratulations on getting the Refuge Manager of the Year Award. Headquarters couldn’t be more pleased that you are the one they recognized this year. We wanted to wait until after the ceremony and official conferring of the honor before calling you about it. But, we have all been talking about how you’ve done an amazing job at North Pass Refuge.”

“Thank you,” she replied weakly.

“This really puts you on the fast track. You have a lot to contribute, and we’re thinking that we need you back to Washington to provide policy and oversight guidance for all the refuges. I don’t know just what the position will be or when. I know you have scheduled some well-deserved leave time. Sooner rather than later after you return from your trip would be our target. Start packing. Well, not really, just know how excited we are to get you up here with us.”

That was all he said. She momentarily felt good to be considered valuable to the whole Refuge System. It was

another affirmation of her hard work and success. She responded cautiously again with a professional thank you.

The minute she hung up she knew the news couldn't be worse. She'd spent her whole life working to get to where she was now. Being the refuge manager was hands-on, in the field, make-it-happen work. She was in charge. The refuge was her own little world. If something broke, she fixed it. If opportunity arose, she grabbed it. Her life was exactly what she wanted it to be. Moving to the Washington Office would ruin everything. She couldn't tell the dogs. She wouldn't tell Bert. She was in celebration mode. She resolved to forget the call happened, at least until after the Camino.

May

Wednesday, May 11, 11:51 AM
To: helen.morgia@southnet.com
From: bchaz@hometown.net
Subject: Being Ready

Dear Helen,

In our first conversation about this crazy idea of yours, you suggested that even if we never went, it would be good to do the training. I have to admit that you were right about that. I'm feeling better about my physical strength than I have in two years. For that I thank you.

Now can we forget about really doing the Camino and just go hang out on a beach in Costa Rica for a month? Friday the 13th is no day to begin an adventure, for crying out loud! B

Thursday, May 12, 3:22 PM

To: bchaz@hometown.net

From: helen.morgia@southnet.com

Subject: Re: Being Ready

Hell no, Old Man. I'm just back from a 12-miler and I am not wasting this woman power on a beach. I'll meet you at the gate at Dulles tomorrow. Don't worry. I'll make sure it is Saturday the 14th when we arrive in Spain. The time has come. We are off to the Camino. Fate is calling. Helen

Dulles International Airport Friday, May 13

Bert had taken an airport limousine so as not to leave his car parked at Dulles for almost two months. He had come early so he would be there when Helen arrived on her flight from Florida. Waiting by her arrival gate he wondered why he had bothered to come early to keep her company for the couple of hours before the flight to Madrid. After all, they'd be together constantly for weeks once they got there.

He couldn't believe he was doing this. How had she talked him into it?

He watched all the people scurrying by to catch flights, or pacing around to ward off boredom while waiting for them. He thought about how, despite the give and take that preceded his decision to do it and the months of training, finding himself actually on his way to Spain seemed disconcerting. Now events were in charge, and like all these other travelers, he would probably have little or no opportunity to control what happened.

Perhaps he had given her too hard a time in his protracted reluctance to come along with her on this adventure. His health concerns had been real enough. Two summers ago he and Helen were at her camp in Orebed Lake in the Adirondacks. He was at the old Orebed Mine looking over a ledge to try to spot whether some loons were nesting below. He fell, far and hard. At the tiny ten-bed hospital in town, the doctors told him that although he recovered well from the immediate effects of the fall, such a massive trauma might cause an aneurism to form. Indeed he was among the unlucky for whom that was true. It helped that having been forewarned, he had monitored his condition.

After the fright and his lengthy recovery, the idea of walking for two months did not sit comfortably. In the end he'd decided that the experience might indeed do him some good, although right now he couldn't imagine how or why. Perhaps because it was so different from anything

he'd done before, it felt like a first step into the abyss Dr. Webster's words had opened before him.

He wondered how many of these other people were traveling today only because someone asked them to do it. After her being such a good friend through his recovery, his lack of enthusiasm for the venture had left him with a twinge of guilt. He could see why she wanted to do something so extraordinary as a way of congratulating herself for getting the award. Being named Refuge Manager of the Year was no small feat, he knew. Still, this whole trip was very unlike her. He wondered if there might be more to this Camino thing of hers.

He looked around again at all the travelers moving about. He felt himself becoming part of that other-worldly travel zone where nothing is real except that you are completely at the mercy of the system. Maybe his dislike for travel had fed his reluctance. He remembered one of the moments that changed his mind. She had said something about how she didn't know why she wanted to celebrate by walking the Camino, but she knew she wanted to take it on. And, she had added in a very uncharacteristically personal comment – she wanted to take it on with him. He could picture her big dark brown eyes as she spoke into the phone. Thinking of them reminded him of that long-ago weekend when it seemed possible a flame could ignite. It didn't happen then. A few times since when their eyes had met, he had renewed

hope that something might be there for them. But it was her saying she wanted to take on the Camino with him that sent a warm, familiar surge of blood through his chest. It rushed in like adrenalin and his resistance collapsed. Still, it troubled him that things would almost certainly go awry, as they had in the past.

He checked his Blackberry for the time. Automatically he looked to see if he had any e-mails. Of course, he didn't. It was only Friday, his first day of vacation, and nobody was likely to need him yet.

He half-heard an announcement that could have been her flight's arrival. Looking at the message board, he saw that her plane had landed.

He scanned the cluster of people coming through the arrival gate, and didn't see her. Of course, she was no taller than five and a half feet, he guessed, and wouldn't stand out in the crowd entering the gate area. Indeed, she was well out into the arrival lounge before she appeared from behind a group of other passengers.

Had he forgotten what a great looking woman she was? Or perhaps, the aneurism had done something to his vision. Already, in May, her face was tanned, and he realized that he was quite pale by comparison. She had obviously been spending more time outdoors than him.

Helen's dark eyes, her whole expression when she spotted him watching her, showed a mixture of pleasure, shock, and puzzlement. Then a little smile appeared on her face.

"You shaved off your beard!"

He rubbed his chin and smiled back at her. "Yeah, I wore the thing for twenty-five years. About a year ago I realized I didn't like the color. It had decided to turn gray. Of course, after I shaved the gray beard the rest of my hair began turning. I imagine the beard would be almost white now, so I'm in no hurry to let it grow back. But you, my friend, you don't seem to have a single gray hair. And your brown locks are shorter, but they haven't gotten straight or begun to fall out. Of course I could be mistaken. Maybe you just have an uncommonly talented hairdresser."

"Well, grayer hair and all, you look good too, but it might be hard to get used to that half-naked face of yours. Glad you kept the moustache. Without the beard your face is more angular and square-jawed, but you haven't lost too much weight with all that rehab."

Bert would have liked her to notice the compliment about her dark hair, but he settled for her thinking he looked good after the long illness.

They swung their backpacks on and headed for the international gates. “You look remarkably fit and trim,” he said. “In those boots, you might even be able to walk five hundred miles.”

“And I plan to do just that. After all our training, maybe I’ll skip the whole way.”

Some of his worry about this adventure faded under the spell of her enthusiasm. As they walked in the stream of passengers moving between gates, and were bombarded by the noise, tension, boredom, and cinnamon aroma omnipresent in airport terminals, he looked at her again and realized that he didn’t know how old Helen was. He’d always assumed they were about the same age, but he wasn’t sure. If she were also in her fifties, she had definitely managed to stay youthful. Her weight was right and she looked strong. As refuge manager, he guessed she walked on dirt roads, mowed fields, tossed around bales of straw, as well as desk-jockeying all the phone calls with the public. Maybe that was it, maybe it wasn’t her physical features, but instead her vitality that came across when he looked at her. She did look good. He hadn’t exactly forgotten it, but it was good to be reminded again how her smile warmed him.

He thought they must quite fashionable. Neither was a clothes horse. But they had both enjoyed shopping for their hiking garb. He was wearing his dark gray titanium hiking pants – the kind with zip-off legs that convert them

to shorts. Even with all their hidden pockets and their self-belt, they fitted his well-trained body. His long-sleeved Tee-shirt was also a quick-dry synthetic material and more fitted than he would usually choose a shirt. But with all his rehab and training, he felt he looked good in it. After all, he was heading off on a hike, not going to an office party. The airport was typically cold so he also had on his ultra-lightweight jacket. It hung loosely on his shoulders for layering over an extra shirt on really cold days. Had he been more attuned to apparel, he would have noted that it matched his blue eyes.

Helen looked even better in her hiking clothes than he felt in his. Like his, her outfit had no hint of slow-to-dry cotton. She too was one hundred percent synthetic material. Instead of a Tee-shirt, she was wearing a short-sleeved one with a collar. Her dark green jacket and convertible pants skimmed over her toned shape. He recalled a passage in a memoir about the Camino Helen had sent him. The author, a Canadian woman, had complained that stylish hiking clothes simply weren't available. Her idea of stylish sure differs from mine, he thought. He and Helen were dressing up to take to the trails, unlike that author, who lamented having to dress down.

They arrived at their gate and settled in for the two-hour wait. He was comfortable to be in her company again and quietly terrified by what they were about to take on.

He looked at the time on his Blackberry every now and then. Before long, it was time to begin boarding. Once they were seated, he liked feeling her shoulder next to his on the shared arm rest.

The long flight went as planned, and they arrived in Madrid before the sun came up.

Their first task was to ascertain that their checked bag arrived with them. Bert had packed a small duffel with his and Helen's walking poles, scissors, jackknife, and a month-long supply of shampoos and other liquids that couldn't be brought into the cabin. They'd brought all the other gear they could in their backpacks to limit what they'd have to replace if their checked duffel didn't make it.

"There it is," she called out. "I claim its arrival as a good omen for the trip."

He too was relieved when it appeared on the carousel. He grabbed it and they headed for the shuttle bus to the RENFE station, where they would get their train to Pamplona.

"The bus leaves in twenty minutes," he said. "I can't believe I'm doing this, but here we are, and the coming disaster has yet to reveal itself."

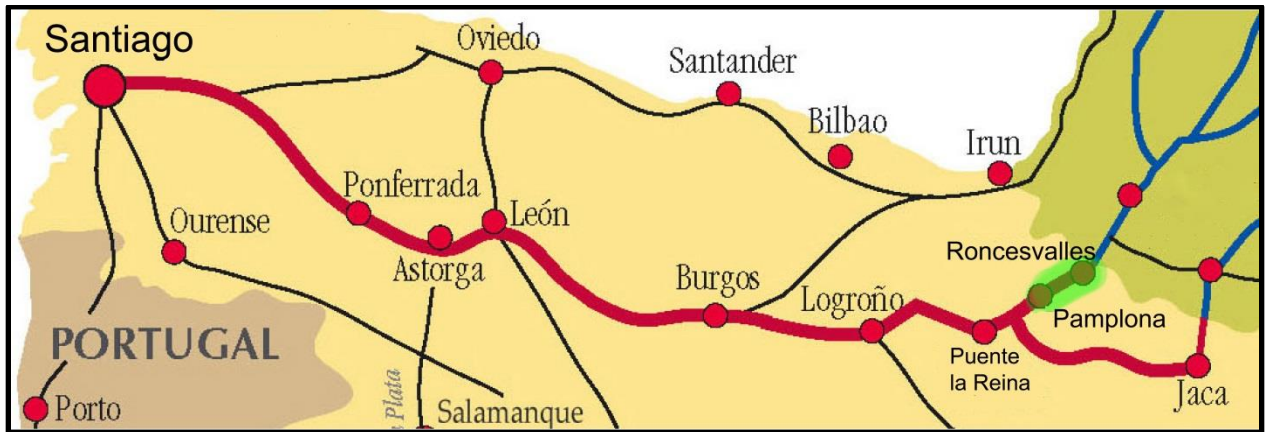
The shuttle bus took them to the Atocha station where they got a high-speed train to Pamplona and then a bus to

Roncesvalles. Bert watched Helen fall asleep. He checked his Blackberry and noted it had updated itself to Spanish time. Of course he had no e-mails. He felt himself nodding off, oblivious to the Spanish landscape rolling by.

Stage One: First Steps

Roncesvalles to Pamplona

Saturday, May 14 - Monday, May 16



The Journey Begins

Roncesvalles – Saturday, May 14

The monastery wasn't at all what Bert expected. They passed through the heavy wooden doors and entered the massive stone building. Stepping into a long hallway flanked by plush couches and antique furnishings, they were bathed in indirect light from modernistic lamps. The warm glow and rich mosaic flooring nicely balanced the rough stone walls and crude wood beams of the ceiling. The charm was unmistakable and almost overwhelming. Clearly the place had been remodeled to serve the needs of the present rather than restored to preserve a remnant of the past. His idea of what a monastery should look or feel like was cold, dank, cramped. He was pleased by its failure to be any of those things.

Following posted instructions, they paid and got their room key at the bar of the nearby Casa Sabina, one of the town's two restaurants. Roncesvalles was tiny. They had gotten off the bus in a daze, having slept only sitting up and only briefly in the past thirty-some hours. Taking in Roncesvalles, they noted it seemed to consist of only about six or seven buildings mostly on the right side of the road. Those in the monastery complex, uphill on the right, were quite large. They had walked no more than a few dozen yards up the road from the bus stop to the monastery, then backtracked a bit to get the key, then back to the monastery.

Reaching their room by elevator, Bert found that it perfectly fit his recently upgraded expectations, being as pleasant and comfortable-looking as the downstairs common rooms. Bright indirect lighting, rough stone walls softened by plush mahogany-color drapes, twin beds, a sitting room with overstuffed chairs, a small kitchen area with microwave oven, warm radiators, and plenty of space where they could organize their gear. In the bathroom he noticed the thick white towels on heated racks, and thought at once that those racks would be put to good use after they finished washing the clothes they'd worn for the past two days of traveling.

"Let's not tell any of our friends what this place is really like," said Helen. "Let's just say we stayed in an old monastery. They can think we were stuffed into tiny cubicles with iron cots and horsehair mattresses."

"I won't let on. It would spoil everything for them. Let them imagine us enduring all sorts of medieval discomfort."

Helen had booked them into the monastery on the advice of Jeanne, who told her that Roncesvalles was said to have a new *albergue*, but advised that the monastery better fit what they would need to recover from their travel. Bert was thankful for the advice. This night at least, he wasn't ready for all the coughing, snoring, and wandering around at night he'd heard are common in the *albergues*.

Exhausted and nearly numb after two days of airports, planes, trains, and buses, Bert felt as if the adventure should be nearly over. Helen appeared to be in no better shape than he was, although she had slept on the transatlantic flight, and he had not. Even on the train from Madrid to Pamplona, he doubted he had slept for more than an hour or so.

When they were settled in, Bert checked the time on his phone. It was already time to go back to the Casa Sabina for dinner. A table was set up inside the door and a young woman was stamping pilgrim passports. Bert had ordered theirs from the American Pilgrims on the Camino just after Helen had booked their plane tickets. Helen had learned from Jeanne that in addition to your official passport, you needed a pilgrim passport. Each overnight accommodation, as well as some churches and other landmarks along the Camino, stamps and dates the passport with a uniquely designed rubber stamp to provide a record of a walker's progress. Brought to the pilgrim office in Santiago, the passport is examined by officials to assure the bearer has walked at least the final one hundred kilometers and qualifies for the official certificate of completion, the *Compostela*.

Bert and Helen got their first stamps and then Bert went to the bar and paid ten euros each for their dinner. He was happy he had gotten a hundred dollars' worth of euros before leaving home; nothing in Roncesvalles

resembled a bank. He had suggested and she agreed that they would take turns paying for meals. They queued up, waiting for the doors to the dining room to be opened. When they got in, a woman led them to a four-person table in a corner where they were joined by a young woman. The room was bright, with red and white checkered tablecloths and curtains, and it echoed with the friendly buzz of conversations in several languages. When all were seated, Bert guessed that this must be his lucky day. The three of them sat at a table with bread and a bottle of wine set up for four. Feeling famished after not having had a real meal in days, he savored the thought of sharing an extra portion of bread and also looked forward to an extra portion of wine.

Their table-mate introduced herself as Maria. She appeared to be in her thirties, was attractive in an understated way with short dark hair framing a round face and a smile that came more from her brown eyes than her small mouth. Her English was only slightly accented. She explained that she was a provincial government scientist from Mexico on a leave of absence. She was walking alone, and had begun walking the day before, across the French border in the town of Saint Jean Pied de Port.

A waitress arrived. For the first course, she offered a mixed salad, spaghetti, or a vegetable soup. For the

second, they could select trout, pork loin, or chicken. For dessert, ice cream, yogurt, or flan. They each responded.

Maria, having experienced one more day on the Camino, explained to them that this was a typical *menu peregrino* – pilgrim menu. She had already heard about them from others when she was walking with them coming over the Pyrenees. They cost less than regular Spanish dinners and are filling, if not culinary delights. And these meals are available in the early evening, before the usual 9:00 dinner hour at Spanish restaurants. She laughed and told them to expect fried potatoes with their meat plate . . . always fried potatoes, the kind Americans call french fries.

Helen told her they had just today arrived from the United States and asked what Maria's impressions were so far in her walking. She said she was pleased to be on the Camino, although she had very little money and was afraid she might find it difficult to make ends meet. She said that earlier she had claimed her place in the *albergue*; it was crowded, some of the patrons were boisterous, and she was already anticipating an unpleasant night. She admitted her envy when Helen described their accommodations in the monastery.

“What brings you on the Camino?” Bert asked as a way of making small talk.

“Oh, it’s really quite simple,” she said. “Two years ago my husband and I spent months planning to do this together. But then he died suddenly and unexpectedly. Now I’m doing it alone.”

Whoa, that was way more than I wanted to know, thought Bert. He instantly regretted having asked the question. Her answer was such a shock, he didn’t even think to say he was sorry for her loss. Even though cops in detective movies always did that. How could she have answered so dispassionately while saying that her husband had just died? His question hadn’t seemed insensitive to him when he asked it. Maybe the way she told the story helped conceal her sorrow. He could tell that Helen noticed it too because she switched the conversation to the smallest of small talk, interjecting something about a missing soup spoon.

A few more words – all cordial – were spoken, but despite the similarity of their professional backgrounds, the conversation essentially was over. Bert wondered whether, having revealed more than she wished, Maria wanted to avoid walking into another trap. Or, maybe it was Helen and he who were unable to keep the exchange going. Was it that the effort to look for safe topics of conversation would be too taxing? Perhaps a bit of both – not to mention the lack of sleep – he thought.

After dinner they attended a special mass in the large church at the end of the monastery. Bert had agreed to go

after Helen assured him that he could think of it as more of a Camino tradition than a church service.

“Come on, Bert,” she said, “most of the others won’t be religious either. We’ll fit right in.”

Once in the church, his observations of the other people in the large crowded space tended to confirm her point. Directly in front of them sat three women who were chatting and obviously knew each other. To his amazement, one of the two younger women seemed to be blind. She wore dark glasses and had a white cane next to her leaning on the bench. The trio appeared to be a mother and her daughters.

The gothic church might have been interesting, but the lighting was so poor that he could make out few of its finer features. The mass was an elaborate affair with three priests. Bert made little sense of it. He did take notice when, in halting English, one of the priests welcomed visitors from the United States of America. This was one of a long series of welcomes in their own languages for people from many countries.

As his mind wandered during the service, he was struck again by the realization that he was here – in the Spanish Pyrenees – at a church service no less, and in a part of the world he had never imagined seeing. He deliberately refused to ask himself, again, how he had let her talk him into it.

As they were walking out of the church, the dinner conversation came back to him. “That Maria must be a very sad young woman, but she didn’t sound sad at all. I guess I shouldn’t have . . .”

“Don’t be hard on yourself. Your question was fine,” Helen interrupted. “It was just small talk.”

“Yes, but her answer really set me back – and the calm way she told us. Oh, by the way, my husband died so I’m walking alone. Maybe she likes to watch people choke on their food!”

“I agree,” said Helen. “It was creepy, as if she were saying that she was on the Camino because she read about it in a magazine or heard about it from a girlfriend. Not because she and her husband were going to do it and now she was doing it for the two of them. Or whatever. How could she not be sad?”

“I thought we had the same reaction, but I didn’t dare look at you. Ha, wait, I have another thought. What if she really wasn’t sad? Maybe she had such a happy marriage that the happiness hung on even after he died. Or what if they were going to walk the Camino because it was their only hope for saving their miserable, unhappy marriage? What if, like each of us were years ago, they were ready for a divorce after a failed, wreck of a marriage?”

With that comment, they arrived back at the room. He knew immediately that she was not pleased with his conjectures. He should know better than to bring up the transitions in their own lives. She shot him a cold look that made him forget that her smile could at times warm him.

“Failed marriage! Give me a break, Bert. You know my ex and I walked away from what you called my failed marriage without pain or sadness. Let’s talk about something else. We’re in treacherous territory here.”

“Okay, okay, but just one more, vaguely related thing. What will each of us say when we’re asked that question? Why are we on the Camino? For me, it’s plain and simple. You asked me. Am I a happy man or a sad man? Either or both, but it’s got nothing to do with why I’m here.”

“We need a good night’s sleep,” Helen insisted. “To end this discussion, let me just say that you don’t know me as well as you think you do. I sure hope that by the time we get to Santiago you won’t say things like that about me anymore.”

Never a fighter, and certainly not wanting to pick a fight now, he resisted the impulse to reply. Taking his night clothes out of his pack, he headed to the bathroom to change. Tomorrow and the beginning of the adventure, or possibly misadventure, would come soon enough.

Into the Unknown

Roncesvalles to Zubiri – Sunday, May 15

Helen awoke with sunbeams falling across her face. Her hair, cut shorter for the Camino than she'd worn it in years, had a slight natural curl. It didn't really get all that messy when she slept. She ran her fingers through it to get it back in place. She had put aside the annoyance she'd felt the night before with Bert's comment about her divorce. She went to the bathroom first to let him have an extra few minutes of rest. She showered and brushed her teeth, relishing the monastery's thick towel and knowing it was an uncommon luxury for the Camino.

She went back to the bedroom to dress for their first day on the Camino.

She watched Bert stretch and head for the bathroom. Rehab did well by him. Not bad for a guy in his fifties, she thought. It struck Helen that even after all the years of their friendship, there was something unnerving about sharing a bedroom.

Weirder, their underwear was hanging side by side in the bathroom when she'd gone in for her shower. Before going to dinner last night, first she and then Bert had washed out what they'd worn since leaving home. All their quick-dry clothes hung, crowded together on the shower bar and heated towel rack. They had dried overnight, just as promised in the ads.

Sharing a room with him was a part of the Camino she supposed she might get used to, but not just yet. A flood of thoughts tried to maneuver into her consciousness, and it took a powerful act of will to ignore them.

As he showered, she pulled on her brown convertible pants again and her light blue Tee-shirt over the freshly washed panties and bra, leaving the green shirt in the pack. She topped the tee with her only long-sleeved shirt, a black thermal one that would serve as a sweater this morning. Despite the sun, she expected it to be only in the fifties when they got outside.

She slipped on her sock liners and wool hiking socks, then laced up her boots. She tucked everything into her pack after she had dressed. Bert too dressed fairly quickly. It doesn't take long, she thought, when you have so few things to choose among. Like her, it took him longer to dress his feet than the rest of him. Lastly, they each pulled out their scallop shells and fastened them to the backs of their packs with lengths of ribbon. The shells were Jeanne's gift to the two of them. They were about four inches across. They were fossils. A storm had unearthed a cache of them along a river bank where she lived in Virginia, and local people were welcome to fossil hunt there. She told Helen that everyone wears a scallop shell as a sign of being on the trail. Indeed they had seen them dangling from backpacks on the bus from Pamplona but

had not thought about getting theirs out before they actually were ready to set out on the trail.

They decided not to have breakfast in Roncesvalles. Neither normally took breakfast at home, and they agreed they'd rather walk an hour or two before stopping for coffee and a snack. They locked the door behind them, took the elevator downstairs, and stepped out into the cool morning mountain air.

"Holy cow, Bert," she said. "I am not in Florida anymore. I should have worn my jacket."

"We'll walk fast, Helen. You'll build up some heat in no time," he replied.

They dropped their key in the box at the restaurant and headed past the old hospital Augustinian monks had built in the twelfth century to house pilgrims.

"I hope Maria got a decent night's sleep in there last night," Helen said. Hoping to put to rest any lingering tension between them about Bert's comments, she added, "I was almost tempted to suggest that she sleep on the chairs in our living room, but she spooked me so with her comment about her husband dying that the thought blew right out of my head."

Looking like an ordinary highway marker, a 790-kilometers-to-Santiago sign appeared on their right as they walked past the bus stop where they'd arrived

yesterday. The Camino trail marker, a bright yellow arrow, was just beyond it, pointing to the right. It was the first of what they expected would be literally hundreds of yellow arrows guiding them along the route.

“And so it begins, at last,” Bert said with near enthusiasm.

Unable to resist converting kilometers to miles and calculating again what she well knew, she replied, “Only five hundred miles to go. Farewell training hikes. Hello celebration of friendship, good health, and a kick-ass year.”

They high-fived in front of the sign, and stepped into the woods. Despite the sun, the dirt trail was muddy from rain earlier in the week.

Helen noticed Bert slipping out the Blackberry and checking it again. How silly, she thought. It was Sunday and no one was at work. She didn't mention it to him.

“I am glad your doctor recommended beginning here instead of Saint Jean Pied de Port,” Helen said. “At least we don't have to climb over the Pyrenees on our first day. Starting over here, this first day shouldn't be overly challenging to my flat-lander legs.”

The thrill of just being on the forested trail turned into a sort of game, a competition to identify the trees and plants. Neither knew the European kinds of plants the

way each knew American ones. Helen was disconcerted by her unfamiliar inability to spout the names of flora around her. But luckily, Bert wasn't much better, although she had to admit he seemed to know a bit more about the trees than she. Pines, oaks, chestnuts, lindens – they were certainly in the ballpark with these, but would need a field guide to pin down exactly what species they were seeing.

“I wonder if that's an American black locust,” Bert said. “I've read they're a troublesome invader in parts of Europe.”

When they had passed out of the forest and Burguete's café-bar appeared, they were still really enjoying the day. Not yet ready for a break, they walked right on by.

They stopped in Espinal, less than two hours into their planned fourteen miles. Walking in the mud was hard and they had begun to tire. Surrounded by tables full of hikers with muddy boots and pant-legs, Helen happily worked her way out of her backpack and rejoiced at her body's new-felt lightness. She watched Bert struggle out of his, and went to get them coffee while he balanced the packs and collapsible aluminum walking poles against the fence so no one would trip over them. He looks great, she thought again – tall, lean, all that peppery gray hair, and back to his healthy self and even more fit looking.

“Well, so far, so good,” he said when she put the cups down. “No disasters yet. Maybe you aren’t as crazy as I thought. Discovering *café con leche* and monastery life may be reason enough to walk the Camino. Can we go home now?” He added this with a laugh. She was almost sure he intended it as a joke, and she laughed with him.

Walking out the other side of Espinal after their break, they noticed that in addition to the omnipresent yellow arrows, here brass scallop shell waymarks were inlaid in the cobblestone pavement. Bert and Helen each snapped some photos of them. Just out of town, the trail widened. Brown cattle with impressive-looking horns grazed, separated from the hikers by a string of barbed wire fencing. Beyond the pastures, misty blue mountains rose. The path climbed steeply. The sweet warmth of the coffee and its crust of melted sugar began to wear off. Her legs began to get really tired. She thought her training might not have prepared her as well as she had believed. I ought to be able to walk farther and not feel like this, she thought.

Bert seemed to want to continue trying to identify plants, but there were fewer along the path here and after a while they gave up.

“What was that you said this morning about being through the Pyrenees, Helen? Maybe, not so much. This is no little hill we are ascending. We may have lulled ourselves with a faulty sense of geography.”

“It pains me to say this, Bert, but the Pyrenees won’t be our biggest climb. The highest point on the Camino is near a place called La Cruz de Ferro – the iron cross, and that’s days and days ahead of us.”

They fell into a one-behind-the-other silent trudge up the hill. Her pack began to feel like it weighed far more than the targeted eighteen pounds. Limiting backpack and contents to 10 percent of one’s body weight was recommended, but she’d struggled to keep hers under 15 percent. Today it just wouldn’t ride comfortably. She wondered why small people like her and tall people like Bert had to struggle with the same size loads in their packs.

“Quit fussing with it, Helen. Your body will adapt if you stop changing the adjustments all the time,” he instructed, as she tried to make it hurt her shoulders less.

Great, she thought, I have to figure out how to get my pack to feel better while not making Bert uncomfortable with my adjusting it.

Finally, topping the short, steep hill, she discovered to her dismay that the downslope seemed steeper and longer than the uphill had been. Her muscles noticed, especially with the trail still being wet. A large stone appeared unaccountably in her boot. Damn! She didn’t mention her boot problem at first. But the stone grew larger with each step. Since he didn’t like her adjusting her pack straps, he

might be really annoyed to have to stop while she “adjusted” a boot. Finally she gave up.

“Bert, I need to find a place to take off my boot. A boulder has moved in and is competing for space with my heel.”

First, of course, she had to set down her walking poles, take off her backpack again, and pull off her boot. Wouldn't you know? No bench. No rock ledge. No dry place to set the pack down. She dropped the backpack on the trail and sat on the grassy berm. Better a dirty pack and a damp seat than an injured foot. Her index finger rooted around knowing the rock it sought would probably be a pebble, a granule, just bigger than the period at the end of a sentence. Found! At least it had two tiny sharp points. She wasn't a hopeless tenderfoot after all. She laced up and tied her boot. Bert hadn't grumbled once. She was grateful. Moving along, she felt the excitement of the first few miles and the boost provided by the coffee break evaporate completely, replaced by her stupidly tired legs, growing tension, and unexpected worries about Bert's reaction.

She lengthened her walking sticks a bit to see if that would help her legs as the steep descent continued.

She had read about real-life problems likely to be encountered on the trail, ranging from black toenails, to blisters, to twisted ankles, and even to disorientation and

dementia caused by dehydration. But why had none of her books mentioned the stone-in-the-shoe hazard, or the getting-your-backpack-off-and-on endurance test?

Aggressive Spanish dogs, wild wolves, snakes, killer bees, malaria-carrying mosquitoes, Basque terrorists, Islamic terrorists, anarchists, rapists, axe murderers, dengue fever, contaminated water, unwholesome food; her friends – the circle of women she saw almost daily in the yoga class, at the refuge, and in her community work – had surely envisioned all of these when they heard what she was planning to do. Their fixation on imaginary hazards had gone into overdrive when she told them she might be doing it alone. What made them think a lone woman was more susceptible to hazards than a man? Maybe if she were younger?

It was almost more annoying that they stopped fussing about the whole idea of the trip when they learned Bert would be coming along. If they really knew her, they would have known how far off the mark they were to dream up a secret romance. And, it was equally ludicrous to imagine Bert providing any credible defense against terrorists, or anything else for that matter. How could they know that he was the one who needed protecting?

Two cyclists startled her away from her Florida memories when they approached suddenly from behind, riding fast to build momentum for the next uphill. “Bikes, Bert,” she shouted to give him a bit of a warning.

"Bon chemin," they called, whizzing past. Helen smiled. Their mistake lightened her spirits a bit. They hadn't switched yet from the French to the Spanish version of the pilgrim greeting.

Her pre-bike reverie returned as the trail began another ascent. Thank goodness her sisters had surprised her when they didn't react to the Camino idea like her town friends. She hadn't even told them about it at first after the women around town had such negative reactions. But when it was only a month until she would leave for Spain, she had e-mailed them with the news. She replayed their return messages in her mind.

Oh my gosh, I'm so jealous, Maureen had replied almost instantly from her smart phone. She had just been to a presentation at her church by a local couple who hiked 300 miles of it the previous summer. Maureen's trademark enthusiasm came through in her written words. As usual, she used too many exclamation points and shouted a WOW in all capital letters.

Donna had been her much more muted self, telling Helen, how much like her it was to plan to walk five hundred miles, train for months, talk a friend into going with her, and be almost on the plane before telling her sisters. She said she knew Helen would love it, and that her punishment for making them wait until the last minute to know she was going would be that she must e-mail them at every possible opportunity and give them all

the details. Bravo for doing this, Sister, she had written, saying she was off to Google El Camino de Santiago de Compostela and figure out exactly what it is she would be doing.

Helen was really disheartened. She hoped the skeptics weren't even close to right about this being too much, and she surely wasn't going to report these negative thoughts to Bert – or her sisters, for that matter. After all those months of training, she shouldn't feel so rotten. She would never admit to feeling this awful.

“Who put these two big hills in our post-Pyrenees path?” Bert said, trying to catch his breath. “Let's take a water break and rest a bit.”

“Great idea,” she replied, settling onto a stone fence next to him and trying to wriggle her water bottle free from its place in the pack's side pocket.

“I felt great this morning when we started out from Roncesvalles, but maybe not quite so great now,” she said, between gulps from her bottle.

“Me, too, but we sure had the wrong impression that Roncesvalles was on the west side of the mountains. I expected to hike along some ridges and be on the downhill all the time. Was I ever wrong!” He said this as if annoyed that he hadn't done his homework. “Did you remember to pack the sandwiches?”

“Dream on. I don’t see any sandwiches in our near future. My Espinal coffee wore off miles back. Really, I expected all our training would have made our first day a pretty easy one. Our legs are strong and they’ve had a couple days rest. What will it be like when they are on their third or fourth day in a row of this?”

She said this trying not to sound as discouraged as she felt. After all, she was the optimist here.

“I guess we’ll adapt,” Bert said. “I accidentally picked a pretty spot for this impromptu break, though. Look at that vista, across the fields where the clouds are floating against the mountains below us. Hope my camera is up to the challenge of capturing these scenes,” he said, adding about six shots to his day’s collection. “But let’s not sit too long or my legs will get stiff.”

She longed to stay put for another fifteen minutes or more, but overcame the urge to protest and stepped back onto the trail. Bert pulled on ahead of her. He was better at taking the uphill, she noticed. He got out of sight as the trail curved to the north slightly.

Had she missed any clues that it would be so hard and tiring after so few miles? Maybe this grand idea wasn’t such a good one after all. This was supposed to be about celebrating her success. But it wasn’t feeling good at all. Some celebration! She wondered if at the end of the

day he might turn out to be more committed to walking the whole thing than she was.

She remembered that when she first asked him to come with her, he had shocked her by saying something like: Honestly, Helen, after the months of working so hard to get back on my feet, I cannot imagine risking my new found health by buying a guidebook and a backpack to walk twelve miles a day for six weeks. Damn! It still bugged her. In all the months of her calling to check on him, he had never given her any clue that he worried about recovering completely, that he was afraid his rehab would come up short, or that when he got back to “fit,” it might be a notch below what he expected. She knew the Camino would be challenging, yes, but not risky. She noted a vulnerability in his comment that she hadn’t expected in him, and she wondered how much he had held back in those calls.

The past vanished from her thoughts when his silhouette materialized out of the tree shadows up ahead of her. She could tell he was in misery, too. There wasn’t the slightest hint of bounce in his stride. His pack listed strongly to the right. His shoulders and back wrenched left. She just couldn’t bear having him hate this. All his earlier skepticism piled misery on her spirit. How had she gotten them to this place where she found herself sitting in roadside grime to get stones out of her boots and straining

against the weight of her backpack to tie unruly shoelaces? Why had she insisted on dragging Bert along?

Maybe walking solo would have been better, she thought. At least she wouldn't be responsible for his enjoying it. If she hadn't inveigled him into coming along, she could adjust her pack and comfort her feet whenever she felt like it. What if the trip really is too much for him?

Despite his insistence that he was healthy, her doubts lingered. She wanted to make him happy about doing this. In the clarity brought by fatigue, she began to agree with his oft-repeated assessment: she was nuts to want them to do this. It now seemed obvious that she was asking too much of him. He'll never enjoy it. She should have done it by herself. Yet, she had never really imagined taking it on without him. She wondered where she had gone wrong.

Bert was waiting for her in front of a café, leaning on his walking poles as if they were all that kept him from collapsing into a heap. The distance to Santiago seemed impossibly long. On the other hand, she wondered whether the trail could be long enough to bring her out of her funk.

They shared a *bocadillo*, a kind of sandwich filled with salami, and each had another *café con leche* before they tried to talk, and the food raised her spirits a bit.

"How are you doing," she asked him at last.

“Not so great,” he replied, confirming her observations. “How’s it going for you?”

She had long ago stopped feeling chilly. She could feel the sweat gluing her hair to her head. She felt flushed. She knew she must be a sight. But she was responsible for their plight, and she didn’t expect him to hold her up. She needed to sound better than she felt.

“I’m weary and more than a bit disappointed. We’ve covered two-thirds of today’s miles and I’m so tired. I thought it would be easier, especially after all our training. We’ve only been walking for about four hours, and this is our second coffee break, plus that nice break along the trail. I can hardly believe I feel like this. How many miles did we walk in those months? I tried to average five miles a day. And you said that people in your neighborhood got so used to seeing you walking around with your backpack that after a while they didn’t mistake you for a homeless person anymore. It has to get better. We did everything by the books. It just has to get better! So, are you all right, really?”

“I’ll survive today, but I don’t know if I can hold out until we begin having fun again, like the first few hours this morning.” Delivered lightheartedly, his words, she thought, were designed to conceal his true feelings.

She was desperate to fix things. “I have an idea. Let me propose a pact. We have our tentative plan to take rest

days in Burgos, León, and Sarria. They're all cities served by trains or buses. Can we ask ourselves as we get to each of them whether we're having fun? Or if not fun, whether we're somehow finding value in this experience. If either of us answers in the negative, we'll agree to follow our own lights. Neither one will feel the obligation to continue or to abandon his or her own Camino for the sake of the other."

"Sounds like a deal to me, but let's add Pamplona or Logroño to the list, too, even though they're not rest days. That'll give us some more safety valves."

They returned to the trail, turned in the direction signaled by the yellow arrow, and continued toward Zubiri, where they would stay for the night. Helen wasn't sure if she was buoyed by the fact that he liked her idea, or maybe by the possibility that it allowed a no-fault way to end the misery if it never got better than this. Five miles to go! The trail leveled out somewhat. Perhaps if she were to look over the trees ahead and below her, she could see the plumes of smoke or steam from the steel mill, if that's what it was. From what the guidebook said, Zubiri appeared to have little to offer. It sounded like a glorified mill town, with perhaps a necessary asterisk appended to the "glorified" part of the description. Maybe it'll be okay, she thought. Then we'll only have another four hundred and eighty-six miles, more or less. Just maybe we'll be able to muddle through the next few days and sometime,

somewhere along the trail, the Camino will do its magic on both of us.

It turned out that the miles to Zubiri were easier, almost all downhill, albeit a bit too steeply at times, and through pretty vistas of distant mountains across open fields. As they crossed the medieval stone bridge into town, she was tired but not as exhausted as she thought she would be when they made their pact.

“All I want from you, fair city of Zubiri, is a good dinner and a great night’s sleep,” Bert announced crossing the bridge. “Oh, and maybe a strong cell phone signal.”

He looked at the phone. “No messages yet,” he said mostly to himself. Helen ignored the comment.

As it turned out, neither of his other wishes was as easy to fulfill as Helen hoped when he said it. To begin, both *albergues* were full. She found the number of a *hostal* in the guidebook and called on Bert’s Blackberry. It became immediately clear that a language problem might deprive them of a place to stay, but somehow the woman she was trying to communicate with on the phone walked out of her shop and found them standing on the sidewalk. It was almost funny. The woman took their money, let them into an apartment building, and stamped their pilgrim passports. Helen was grateful that a room was available, even though it was on the fourth floor of the old building that had no elevator. Five flights of stairs later —

they discovered that the ground floor in Spain is *Piso 0*—the ground floor. They settled into a room with twin beds, and a kitchen and bathroom shared by the three double rooms on that floor. So far, they were the only occupants. She was sure that wouldn't last, with the *albergues* full.

She showered and dug out her green shirt and clean gray pair of pants. While she showered Bert had washed his clothes in the kitchen and found a rack to hang them on. They switched places. With their clean-up finished, they collapsed on their beds to rest and heard a hard rain begin outside.

“Lucky we're in here and not facing that on the last few miles of this day,” Bert said. “I have to admit to a sense of pride that I managed to make it through today.”

“What a rain! I hope the clouds get all rung out with this one and it will be dry after this. I thought you did relatively well for an old guy, just off rehab,” she said, hoping that tomorrow would be easier on both of them. She would never say it out loud, but now that he mentioned it, she realized that she too felt proud of herself for getting through Day One and for not letting on how bad she'd felt most of the time.

After their couple of hours of resting, the rain stopped, and they went looking for what the guidebook said was the only restaurant in town. They found it right away and read the sign posted on the door announcing

that it was closed for the day, for fumigation! They returned to a *tienda* they had passed and picked up some items for supper. The shopkeeper pressed some dried apricots on them also, saying in halting English that every pilgrim needs them for potassium. "Okay," said Helen, "*Gracias*. Thanks for the advice."

No other hikers had moved into the *hostal*, and they had the kitchen all to themselves for their picnic of cheese, bread, and *chorizo*. She saw Bert check his Blackberry again and hoped he wasn't thinking he'd rather be at work than here. They went to sleep early, hoping for a solid ten hours of rest. In the night Helen awoke to the sound of more heavy rain, but rolled right back to sleep.

Despite her misery and misgivings, they had the first day under their belts.

Friendship

Zubiri to Pamplona – Monday, May 16

The night's rest in Zubiri refreshed them more than she had dared hope. When morning came, the heavy rain of the afternoon and night before had turned to drizzle – not quite what she would have ordered, but acceptable. She topped yesterday's shirt layers with her green North Face all-weather jacket. Bert said he didn't think he'd need his and left it in his backpack. He put his phone in a ziplock bag to protect it and slipped it in his pocket so he could check for messages along the way. They slipped on their ponchos, his yellow and hers red.

Morning Two wasn't the adrenalin rush the first morning had been, but Helen was in a good mood going back over the stone bridge to pick up the trail. She wondered if it had to do with the weirdness of setting out for a day of walking when it was raining, like a kid at camp, or characters in a movie. Who does such a thing? It fit her sense of what a Camino ought to be. She was pleased that Bert wasn't complaining or acting like he was miserable.

They spent more time at the arched stone bridge this morning than when they arrived yesterday afternoon. The guidebook said that in the Middle Ages it had a reputation for curing animals of rabies if they were led three times

around its central arch. Bert, his poncho flapping over his backpack, started walking the circle.

“Maybe if it cured rabies, it can give extra strength to old legs,” Bert said with a laugh. An English-speaking Korean couple in their twenties walked up to them just at that moment. Not surprisingly, they asked Bert what he was doing, then laughed and joined in walking in circles as Helen took their picture.

They all headed off for Pamplona on a narrow muddy trail through the woods, the young people quickly outpacing Bert and Helen. The overnight rain, on top of rain earlier in the week and this morning’s drizzle, made the trail a long series of puddles they had to tiptoe around, and occasionally to ford. In places the trail became a creek as water actually flowed along it.

They soon gave up on trying to avoid places with standing or running water.

“I just figured out why you encouraged me to buy waterproof, ankle-high boots, Helen,” Bert said. “You knew about this trail ahead of time.”

Hoping he didn’t mean it as a criticism, Helen replied, “For sure, and I’m going to just walk right down the center of the path as if it were dry. Why waste energy tiptoeing when we are so perfectly outfitted, due to my amazing foresight?”

They saw the young Koreans with someone else up ahead, apparently hesitating. Catching up, they saw why. The trail was intersected by a stream flowing down through the woods from left to right. It must usually have been gentle enough to cross over on five stepping stones placed strategically across it. Not today! Today water was boiling down the hill, overtopping the stones, behind which a log had wedged but still bounced up and down with the water's force, making it clear hikers should not try to tread on it.

The young man who had joined the Koreans went first, balancing across on the stones and getting wet to the knees. Helen was trying to think of a way to make it less likely that any of them would end up wet all over but the young people just jumped in. Their companion reached out his walking sticks to help them balance and they made it, laughing all the way. Their sense of it being an adventure spilled over enough, so Bert and Helen with their sticks at the ready in case they began to slip, followed one another over and then took photos of each other posing at the water's edge.

"The Camino must have a lesson for us in that adventure," Helen said.

"Yeah, maybe it's something about learning from the younger generation how to be carefree?" Bert replied.

After a few miles the little village of Larrasoaña appeared just as they were ready for coffee and a bit of breakfast. A wide brick road ran through the town. Hikers, cars, and farm vehicles shared it. This morning there were more hikers than vehicles. The café-bar at the far end of town, not more than a quarter mile from where they entered it, was a welcome respite from the drizzle. The brick road ended just past the bar, and trail was no less challengingly muddy when they rejoined it after their break.

In tiny Zurián they met an Englishman who advised them that the trail would stay along the road briefly, cross a bridge, and go along through a farm. In no uncertain terms, he told them to avoid the wet trail and stay on the highway, the N-135, toward Pamplona.

Before they got to the bridge, they began to doubt the wisdom of this advice because their good, walking-in-the-rain mood began to dissolve as they made their way along the berm. Traffic was heavy, the shoulder was narrow, and the route provided little in the way of scenery. And although not muddy like the trail, sticking to the road made them endure the spray from passing vehicles. Slogging along, they tracked their progress by the roadside tenth-kilometer markers, and watched for the bridge that would let them escape the highway.

They had left the road and gone along the trail no more than a few hundred yards after crossing the bridge

however, when they were met by an apparent farmer wearing mud-encrusted rubber boots. With a few Spanish words and many gestures, he made it clear that the trail ahead was impassible, and that they should return to the highway. So, after backtracking, they again found themselves on the narrow shoulder of a two-lane road they shared with speeding cars and trucks.

Before long the sun began to show itself from time to time, and their good spirits tried valiantly to return with it. Helen stopped to photograph the deep blue and bright yellow wildflowers lining the roadside. She fell behind, and Bert made no attempt to slow down or wait while she took her photos. That suited her just fine. If he stood by fidgeting, she'd feel she ought to hurry.

She caught up with him again at a little park. It seemed to be about the midpoint of the day's planned twelve miles and there was more sun than drizzle, for the moment at least. They filled their water bottles at the park fountain and rested awhile at a picnic table.

"The Camino has got you talking to yourself, Helen, old girl," Bert said as they tried some of their dried apricots. "What were you mumbling about back there?"

"Oh, sorry, I didn't really even know I was talking out loud. I was trying to identify the wildflowers. Some of them have me puzzled. There are daisies and poppies and thistles, and they're no problem, but the others are hard to

pin down. There are mustard-looking things, and chicory-looking things, and something that looks like a miniature dandelion. Some other flowers that look like foxglove – not the big ones, but these are much smaller – really tiny. There’s something that might be a relative of Queen Anne’s lace, and some little puffball blossoms that remind me of beebalm. Oh, and a likely kind of red clover is growing here too. I can’t decide whether to trust their resemblance to the ones I know from home, or give up until I can get a good European wildflower book.”

“I didn’t know you were a wildflower enthusiast.”

“That’s only one of many things you don’t know about me, Mr. Charles. For your information, I can identify the wildflowers of Gulf Coast swamps, marshes, and hammocks with the best of them.”

“How did that happen? You used to be more of a birdwatcher.”

“Actually, there is a local wildflower club whose members come regularly to botanize on the refuge. It’s an interesting group of men and women who put to rest the old image of garden clubs being populated only by little old ladies in sneakers or even hiking boots. After I’d been there a while, they asked me to come along on a wildflower walk. I agreed, thinking I should because building a good rapport with the locals is part of my job as refuge manager.

“I really like the group. They are fun, eclectic, and know their plants well. If I didn’t need to maintain my professional, refuge-manager demeanor, I could imagine being friends with some of them. I almost wish it weren’t part of my job so I could.”

“Hello, pilgrims.” They were greeted by a man with an Irish accent who approached from the opposite direction. Apparently about seventy, he seemed to stare intently, as if struggling to see them through his thick, not-too-clean plastic-framed glasses. His backpack was an old-fashioned model without a rigid frame.

“May I join you and share your rest period for a while?” His manner of speaking seemed as Irish as his accent.

“Absolutely,” Helen said. She moved over on the picnic bench and gestured for him to join her.

“Aren’t you going the wrong way?” asked Bert.

“I am one of those odd ducks who want to try walking it back as well,” he replied. “I walked to Santiago last summer. This year, I am walking to Roncesvalles. And because I know you are about to ask why, I will tell you my two reasons for wanting to walk back,” he said with a look in his eye that made clear he loved giving these pseudo-reasons.

“When I walked to Santiago, going always east to west, my left arm and the left side of the face were always exposed to the sun moving across the southern sky. At the end, my left side was much darker than my right side. I just had to walk back and even out my tan.”

“Well that’s a funny tale, but I think I am more likely to believe reason number two than that one,” said Bert feigning a jovial push on the shoulder with his hand.

“Okay, here’s the other reason. I bet you will find no holes in the logic of this one,” he said raising his hand as if taking a pledge.

“I had to walk back because all my pictures from the last walk were facing west. You see, the effect on photography has been less noted than the effect on skin tone, and is even more dramatic. How many pictures of the Camino does one see that look toward the east? When one is walking toward the west and looking ahead, the scenes before you attract your attention. This bias is compounded by the position of the sun, which directly illuminates objects ahead of you. Vistas seen to the east are sometimes spectacular, but backlighting degrades the quality of photographs and discourages amateur photographers. I recall wonderful scenes to the east viewed when leaving Foncebadón in the early morning, but backlighting made capturing them impossible. Another example of difficult to capture vistas are the ones behind you when climbing toward O’Cebreiro. I may have

gotten one or two acceptable photos of these, but the images compare poorly with those of the vistas extending before me, like those taken when coming down from La Cruz de Ferro. So, that's my second reason."

"I join Bert in believing that one more than the first," Helen said with a laugh. "And we will try to learn from you and pay attention to the vistas behind us, even if we cannot take good photos of them.

"Good, you'll be glad you did," said their companion, nodding at Helen and smiling at her approval of his storytelling.

"Really, it is a quite different adventure to walk to the east, I get lost rather often because the trail markers all go east to west. Still I have enjoyed it and am almost finished. Which, by the way, I'm beginning to regret already. I was surprised to find myself sorry for my Camino to end last year. This year I expect it."

"We're only on Day Two and still wondering if we can possibly do the whole thing," Bert said.

"Not to worry," he said. "The first two days are killers, regardless of how well trained you are. Day Three should be a bit kinder to you. Let me offer some advice to make your second day better. The trail leaves this park, crosses the road, and goes up over that hill into Burlada, a

suburb of Pamplona. I discovered that there is also a river walk that begins near here. See that sign over to the left?"

He stood pointing with his whole arm and Helen got up to see.

"Go over to that sign and you'll pick it up. The river walk is a linear park, a Pamplona city park, and follows the river all the way to town. It is paved. No mud. No hills! The river is lovely all the way. Today it is busting the banks from all the runoff of the recent rains. Dramatic and exciting. I just walked it from the city and highly recommend it."

"Thanks for the suggestion," Helen said.

"I'm off now," replied the Irishman as he launched his lanky form in the direction from which they had come.

"Nice to chat with you," he said as he breezed away from them.

"Buen Camino," Bert and Helen said, almost in unison.

"What do you think?" Helen asked. "Shall we try the river walk?"

"Veering from the guidebook gives me pause, but I do like the no hills, no mud promise. And it should be interesting to see the river so full."

“Good,” Helen said, pulling her pack back on. “I like the idea, too.”

As they began to walk again, Bert picked up on the earlier conversation. “You haven’t said much about the social life in Sandpine Key. Do you like living there? Is it a place where people like us can fit in?”

“It’s a really laid-back and lovely place to live, and I enjoy the people. I stay involved with organizations like the Community Arts Center, Friends of the Library, and the Chamber of Commerce. But I’m always aware I am not the norm. I mean, being a single woman and the refuge manager. And I need to be always representing the refuge. There are still people who would rather not have a federal government presence in their backyard. On the whole I feel welcome, but of course I can never just be me, except when I’m off with the dogs on a hike or something.”

The wide concrete river walk was shaded by trees and as lovely as the Irishman had described it. They didn’t need their walking sticks here. They collapsed them and hung them from their packs on carabiners. The river was almost always in view. Boiling along, it was the color of mud today.

“Sorry to shout, but the river is really loud,” said Bert. “I am glad we came this way. It is wonderful to see nature so agitated. As long as the rain continues to hold off, that

is. How did the Sandpine Key folks react when they learned you would be walking on the Camino?”

“Actually, they annoyed me more than a little with all their concerns about the dangers, especially for a woman. They know I can manage a refuge. What made them think I couldn’t manage to take myself on a walk? I suppose they thought I was a little crazy. But people who live there sort of pride themselves on being a little crazy to live where there are no chain stores, no fast food restaurants, no doctors or dentists, and a school that goes K through 12 in the same little building.

“I thought they should have given me more credit for being competent. Maybe if I survive the Camino and return, the craziness of having done it will give me credentials as one of the in-crowd.” Helen reached back with both arms, boosted her pack up off her shoulders, and let it resettle. It felt better.

Bicycles with helmeted riders in bright yellow and red team shirts came at them from both directions at once. Helen stepped left and Bert right, bumping hard into each other.

“I’m beginning to hate bicycles and guys of a certain age,” Bert shouted above the roar of the river. “If unemployment weren’t fifty percent here for people in their twenties, I’d shout at them to go get a job! At least they could use bells and warn us. This path seems to be a

magnet for them. I wonder how often a walker jumps in front of one trying to get out of the way, instead of into each other like we did. Are you okay?"

"Just threw me off balance for a sec, but no harm done."

He changed the subject. "Did you know that I lead monthly plant identification walks at the Potomac River Refuge?"

"Really?" she said looking at him, eyebrows raised.

"Really," he replied with a nod. "If I get to visit Sandpine Key again, I would be interested in going out with your wildflower folks. Think they would let me in?"

"I'd have to warn them that they couldn't count on you to be faithful to flowers, because despite your plant walk bona fides, if a turtle or skink crossed the trail, you'd be off to follow it in a flash."

As they continued along the trail, Helen's photographic exploits slowed her progress again, and Bert disappeared somewhere ahead of her. A couple overtook her, slowing to her pace to chat. A few years older than Helen, they said they were from Germany. They spoke excellent English. Loudly, to be heard over the river, they immediately began peppering her with information in tag team fashion.

Their names were Heinrich and Trudi. They had intended to walk all the way from their home near Stuttgart to Santiago, but practicality had intervened, and they instead had taken public transportation and begun walking from Lyon, in France. Time as such was not a factor, they said, because they were both retired. But they didn't want to be walking so long that they would be enduring the heat of summer. They said they had been walking about thirty kilometers a day and taking a day of rest every third or fourth day. Pamplona would be their next rest day. They would be staying in *albergues* most of the time, but on the rest days they would stay in the most expensive and luxurious hotels they could find. They didn't really mind the predictable pilgrim meals, but would have liked to try something else if they could only find a way to adapt to the local custom of dining in the late evening. Food was much cheaper and more plentiful here than in Germany, and maybe that had something to do with why Germany was in good shape in the debt crisis, and Spain found itself in such a bad situation.

Maybe they've been eating their way through Spain, thought Helen. They were both on the short side of normal and had gray hair, hers wildly thick, curly, and blowing in the wind. His long and pulled into a snuggy at the back of his neck. She would have described them as plump, if not rotund, but they seemed surprisingly strong and energetic. They must have excess energy, she thought.

Otherwise they wouldn't be able to spew out so much verbiage while walking at a good pace.

They had an endless supply of chatter, much of which she found dull. Expecting one of them to whip out pictures of grandchildren at any moment, Helen tried to get at least a tiny bit of control over the conversation.

"My walking partner and I, he's up ahead somewhere, we don't have any master plan for attacking the Camino. We just started yesterday. We plan to walk about twelve miles, or twenty kilometers a day, and stop overnight in places that best fit with how we feel. By the way, my name is Helen, and . . ."

Trudi cut her off.

"Are you American? Where are you from? We have some very good friends we met on the Camino last year. This is our second time. They live in Missouri, near St. Louis. It turns out that he, George—George and Heinrich have a great deal in common because they are both interested in model railroads. That's not even the end of it, because they both even belong to the Rotary Club. What do you do for recreation? Other than walking on the Camino?"

"I live in western Florida, and I guess I really don't have any hobbies or pastimes. I work full time."

“We’re planning very soon on visiting Florida. Trudi has always wanted to go to Orlando, and we talked about maybe also seeing Palm Beach. Maybe we could drop in on you when we are there. We could have gotten a great deal on Disney World in Paris, but decided we’d rather see the real thing.”

Helen was amused. Nothing about Disney World is the real thing, she thought.

“We’ve kept in close touch with our friends in St. Louis. By e-mail. We have invited them to visit us in Germany; we have a big house, and they could stay with us and drive around and see the sights. We have two motorbikes, but I do not think they would be the best thing for driving all over Germany. We never take them out on the autobahn.”

“Trudi, tell Helen about Natalie.”

Helen tried to stifle a sigh. If she failed, they didn’t notice.

“Oh, yes! Natalie is probably the nicest, best person in the world, and we met her on the Camino. We met her last year too. She is from England, a little younger than us. Maybe about your age. Never married, and she has this wonderful career as a travel agent. She has been all over the world and has just the most interesting stories you can possibly imagine. We became good friends almost the

moment we met, and we are in touch at least once each week by e-mail, and sometimes by phone also.”

Heinrich picked up the story. “We met her just after León and walked the whole rest of the way with her. She could not come this year because of her work, but next year we are planning to do something big together.”

Helen wished they’d walk on so she could again enjoy the peace of the roaring river. She was greatly relieved when they came up on Bert, who was waiting on a bench near a lovely old bridge. She managed the introductions and explained she and Bert were going to stop awhile to rest. They all said goodbye, with promises to look for each other someplace on toward Santiago.

“Where did you pick up your friends? They babbled a bit, but seemed engaging enough, and their English was good.”

“I’ll tell you about it later; I’m not sure I have the energy right now.”

“You know, this is a very nice path and I’m enjoying being away from the highway and the muddy trails, but it bothers me not having our yellow arrows to let us know we’re going the right way. Oh, I know that we can’t miss Pamplona, and it clearly will be possible to pick up the trail there, but I want to keep seeing those arrows.”

When Helen's chatty would-be friends were well on ahead, they returned to the walk. They were in the outskirts of the city now, and the river walk tracked past apartments, schools, and playgrounds. They topped a little hill and spotted Pamplona's landmark Puente de Magdalena, a graceful three-arch stone bridge built in the twelfth century. The drizzle had returned. As they crossed the bridge, Helen spotted a blond woman in a pink jacket sitting on a park bench with her boots off. She caught Helen's eye and seemed to want to talk. Her feet were heavily bandaged and Helen guessed she had bad blisters. Saying she thought she ought to see if the woman needed something, she told Bert to go on ahead. She'd catch up with him at the gate they could see up ahead in the city walls.

She rejoined him quickly, as planned. He was reading something on his phone when she spotted him up ahead. He put it right away when she approached. He didn't say anything about it and she didn't ask. Together they began to take in the city. Seeking shelter as the rain got harder, they had a soft drink, pastry, and bathroom break at a café-bar. They believed the hotel where they planned to stay was on the far side of town, but it was still early, and they wanted to explore the city.

"Well, here we are," said Helen. "Pamplona is the first test of our no-fault pact. I think I want to keep going. Maybe not all the way to Santiago, but at least for a while.

Despite the muddy trail, the incredible puddles, and having to walk the road, today was better than yesterday afternoon. I think I can imagine someday showing the photos of us fording that stream with the Koreans and bragging about how cool I was with it. And maybe tomorrow will be as good as yesterday morning.”

“I don’t know. I’ve been mostly miserable, but I’m not ready to concede yet either,” said Bert. “We did manage on Day Two. We walked a full twelve miles and met some decidedly different folks. I got two e-mails from the office, but neither required that I do anything. Since I am still upright, I don’t think the Camino has a chance of making me like it, but maybe I’ll be able to survive a bit more of it.”

“The German couple I met – Trudi and Heinrich – were a trip. It was almost like being accosted by those vendors in bazaars who are trying every trick they can think of to sell you something. They couldn’t tell me enough about themselves. I was afraid they would eventually have wanted me to tell them just as much about me. As it was, I didn’t have to worry about that—they gave me almost no opportunity to take part in the conversation. They were aggressively friendly, and somehow it didn’t work with me. I didn’t dislike them. It wasn’t that. I was . . . I guess, I was . . . suspicious. What did they want? And what made them think I was the

person to offer it to them? It was as if they wanted to invade my privacy. It was almost creepy.”

“I’m never going to remember the names of all the people we meet. Maybe we ought to give them nicknames. There’s a guy in my neighborhood that I passed almost every day on my training walks. He is covered with tattoos. I still don’t know his name, but I think of him as Tattoo Man. And, I think people called me the Backpacker. We need a nickname for your Germans.”

“Good idea. Give me a minute and I’ll think of one.”

“Was Sore Feet Lady okay?” Bert asked.

“Her name is Kristen, but her nickname is going to be Nosy Sore Feet Lady, instead of just Sore Feet Lady. She’s from Sweden and she’s got a miserable case of blisters. She’s doing all right. As well as could be expected. She’s being smart. She has taken bus rides over parts of the route to help keep her off her feet. She said she’s keeping up with her plans to get to Santiago before she has to return home. She didn’t tell me where she started. She seemed very nice and I was beginning to think I might enjoy her. But then she got all pushy.”

Helen wondered if the look on her face conveyed to Bert the mixture of feelings she had experienced.

“There I was, trying to be helpful if she needed me, and out of the blue she asked why I was walking the Camino.”

Helen felt herself not looking Bert in the face as she told the story. It was almost embarrassing to replay the exchange.

“I told her I was celebrating a good year. But then she wanted to know what I was celebrating. I just didn’t see any reason to have to go into that. Wouldn’t you think ‘celebration’ would be explanation enough?”

Helen waved her hand as if she wanted to bat Kristen’s questions away.

“She wasn’t nearly as pushy as Trudi and Heinrich.” Helen squinted trying to think of a good nickname that didn’t come yet. “But she surely didn’t take the hint that there were things I didn’t want to discuss. She even asked my boyfriend’s name and how he’s enjoying the Camino! How do people get off thinking they can ask things like that?”

“I met someone too, a German man named Rolf. We walked up into the city together. We had a nice, but strange, chat while we rested in the drizzle. It wasn’t like your experience of being smothered in chatter by your German couple or pushed into the corner by Nosy Sore Feet Lady. Quite the contrary, there was no purpose to it. I

talked about wildlife biology and he talked about auto parts – he’s an engineer – and we ‘solved the world’s problems,’ as the saying goes. We were like two old men sitting on a park bench. It was almost like we were talking to ourselves but were pretending we were enlightening one another.”

“I didn’t tell you this, but my German couple went on and on about the wonderful friends they had met on the Camino. I thought that if I wasn’t careful, I might be added to their collection.”

“Maybe you already have. Even now they could be telling someone what a great friend you were to them.”

“Oh, no, what an awful thought!”

“I’ve got it. We’ll call them, the Friend Collectors!”

“I love it. Trudi and Heinrich, the Friends Collectors. Perfect, Bert.” She sat back in her chair and smiled. I really do enjoy Bert’s company when he’s not in a mood, she thought.

“Two of the memoirs I read about the Camino talked a lot about friends the authors made along the way,” Helen said, reaching for her drink. “One author was religious and on a quest of some kind. The other was not religious but searching for the true meaning of his life, or something like that. Remarkably, each of them spent the first part of their books focused on their goals and the last

part focused on the friendships they had made with other pilgrims. They get to Santiago, and thud! There's scarcely a word about whether or not they achieved the original lofty goals."

"What do you think happened?"

"I don't know. Maybe they failed to achieve their goals and substituted their new friendships as consolation prizes. Or maybe they were just lonely."

"I wonder what our Camino goals are, Helen."

"Other than celebrating my fantastic year, I don't think I have one. I think I'm sick of goals," she said tilting her head and smiling at him. "But if I have a subconscious one, maybe I'll recognize it by Santiago. Ask me again there, if we're still friends by then."

"Oh, I am pretty sure we'll still be friends. Assuming we've passed through all of those cities where either of us could have decided to bail, that is. Contrary to your thinking we have no goals, I think we will find we do as our Caminos go along."

He leaned into the table and whispered to her.

"Why, I'll probably join a monastery and you'll take some vows and join up with a group of nuns."

“Join any monastery you like, Reverend Brother Bert. I’m trying to picture you with one of those hairdos where there’s only a fringe of curly salt and pepper hair, and a bald spot on top of the head. But don’t look for me to be joining any convent.”

She held her eyes on his, smiling and twirling her hand around the top of her head where his imagined tonsure would be.

“Okay, but expect me to remind you of my prediction someday, Sister Helen.”

He folded his hands and bowed his head in her direction, smiling broadly. “But for now, let’s move on and find our hotel. And along the way an Internet café. I need to be in touch with my task force, and you need to check your e-mail and see if your refuge is surviving without you. Don’t you wish you brought along a smart phone?”

“Absolutely not! Your Blackberry is more than enough of a phone for both of us.”

Friday, May 13. 4:25 PM

To: helen.morgia@southnet.com

From: dan@northpinerefuge.gov

Subject: Doing great here

Helen,

You have been gone for two days and your staff wants me to report for all of us that the refuge has survived so far! Of course, we are sitting around drinking colas all day and doing zero work just because in your absence I told them they are free to loaf.

Ha! Actually it has been routinely busy with no news worthy of reporting. I know you plan to keep us as far out of mind as possible, but we are very curious to know how the first few days have gone. We will try not to pester you, but at least let us know if by now you are agreeing with the rest of us that walking 500 miles is a weird way to spend a vacation.

Dan and crew

Monday, May 16, 5:04 PM

To: dan@northpinerefuge.gov

From: Helen.morgia@southnet.com

Subject: Doing great here too

Okay, All of you. Off your duffs and back to work or I'll use you as an excuse to cut this short and come back to restful work! And to think I detailed you, Dan, into being the Acting Refuge Manager thinking you'd work them all to death.

As for me, the first few days, honestly, were a bit harder than I expected. The trail has been hilly and wet. But the scenery in the mountains was spectacular. We walked along ridges for part of the 14 miles. Often we could view through the nearby pines across deep green valleys to more mountains beyond. Today we walked many miles along a river walk leading to the historic center of the walled city of Pamplona. We spent part of the afternoon in the massive central plaza at a café watching the rain fall. It feels like people here live in history. Maybe Hemingway will appear any minute. They are in the same buildings people lived in centuries ago. They don't go to museums to see the past, just home.

The trip is going to be a wonderful experience, I am certain.

Thanks for letting me know all is well . . . even though I have been deliberately not thinking about you.

Helen the Hiker

Thursday, May 12, 10:46 AM
To: Donna121@midnet.net
Cc: Helen.morgia@southnet.com
From: Maureen327@midnet.net
Subject: Talked to a Camino hiker

Donna (and Helen),

So our big sister is off on the adventure tomorrow. Five hundred miles! That's walking from New Orleans to Dallas, from Washington to Montreal, from San Francisco to Las Vegas. Not normal. Strangely intriguing, I have to admit. I just couldn't imagine it.

Finally, yesterday, I had coffee with the woman who gave the talk about it at my church. I called her right after you told us, Helen, but our schedules never matched until now.

I asked her if it is like the Appalachian Trail. I had laughed my way through Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*, but I would never go anywhere near that experience and could not imagine anyone I'm related to doing it either.

She got my concern immediately. "Not a bear or a bad guy to be found on the Camino," she told me. "What's more, you don't sleep outdoors in a lean-to shared with mice, and not once did we ford a stream holding our backpacks overhead to keep our clothes dry."

That made me curious about where people do stay. She and her husband stayed in albergues. Apparently, they're sort of like pilgrim hostels, Donna. But there are also small inns and hotels or simple bed and breakfasts. The more she talked, the better it sounded to me.

I had been picturing that it would be 500 miles of trails through the woods, but she said there is not very much woods, that it is more walking through quaint medieval villages, fields of wheat, vineyards, and hills covered with flowering shrubs--lavender, gorse, and heather. They weren't all alone, but surrounded by a steady stream of fellow walkers. And, she assured me they rested, not on rocks or logs in the forest like Bill Bryson, but at café-bars with café con leche, Spanish omelets, and indoor toilets. I may be starting to see why one of us might take to this idea.

Can't wait to hear it from a sister's perspective.

Maureen

Thursday, May 12 1:52 PM
To: Maureen327@midnet.net
CC: Helen.morgia@southnet.com
From: Donna121@midnet.net
Subject: Researching El Camino

Maureen and Helen,

Well I too did some research. What I learned is that El Camino de Santiago de Compostela is a "pilgrim trail." I cannot possibly picture you as a pilgrim, Helen. Maureen, I see you as carrying on the family church-going tradition for all three of us. But the more I read, the more I understood that over the past 1,000 years, the word pilgrim took on a broad meaning. And the pilgrimage history is a wonderful backdrop to the adventure.

Anyhow, I copied the article and am attaching it here. I'm pretty sure that Helen must already know all of this (and she probably could have provided it to us!), but I'm cutting her some slack and copying it to her too, just in case she hasn't heard all of it.

The legend says that Christ's disciples divided up the world to spread his message after his death. The apostle James the Elder drew the lot for the Iberian Peninsula. James had a rough time of it, apparently making only about a dozen converts in his months of difficult walking and preaching from the Atlantic coast to the Pyrenees in what would become Spain. Disheartened, he returned to Jerusalem. Despite what poor James saw as his dismal failure at spreading the word, Herod beheaded him for having tried and James the Elder became St. James.

His friends took his body back to Spain, burying him in a soon forgotten spot. One lovely legend says he was

miraculously transported over the seas in a stone boat guided by angels.

Eight hundred years later, during the wars between the Christians and the Moors in Spain, a shepherd reported to his bishop that he saw a star dancing over a field and found bones there. The bishop determined that the bones were those of St James. He built a small village at the spot, Campus de la Stella (Field of the Star), and proclaimed that pilgrims were welcome to visit and to contribute a few pennies toward the building of a church to honor St. James. As pilgrims trickled in, miracles were reported.

Before long, many pilgrims began to arrive from all over Europe, trekking over dangerous routes for many weeks and months. Although in medieval times, pilgrims began their journeys from wherever they were and headed for Santiago, preferred routes became established over time. The most popular now begins in central France, continues for about 500 miles to the French side of the Pyrenees, crosses over the mountains at Roland's Pass. From there it goes about 500 more miles through northern Spain to the grand cathedral of St. James in Santiago.

The stories place the number at over one million annual pilgrim visits to Santiago during the Middle Ages. Some were in search of a miracle. Some were sentenced to the pilgrimage as punishment for crimes. Others were eager for the escape that pilgrimage provided from the misery of medieval village life. The pennies they left accumulated adequately to fund the construction of the cathedral and the tiny town of Campus de la Stella became the city of Santiago de Compostela.

Regardless of how literally you take the stories about it, this trail sings with tradition, culture, and the ghosts of the past. Our big sister is not on an ordinary walk. It may be even more of an experience than I imagined when she told us.

Enjoy, Donna

Friday, May 13 4:12 PM

To: Helen.morgia@southnet.com

Cc: Donna121@midnet.net

From: Maureen327@midnet.net

Subject: Safe Journey

Well, I am glad to have learned that you won't be sleeping in wet lean-tos and that you'll have indoor plumbing. I know all your training and preparations added to your job kept you really busy in these last few weeks, so I was doubly happy to have someone here I could ask about your experience. I didn't want to pester you with my questions.

I know you won't see this for several days, but want you to know that all of us are thinking about you and your great adventure. Maureen

Saturday, May 14, 1:15 PM

To: Helen.morgia@southnet.com

Cc: Maureen327@midnet.net

From: Donna121@midnet.net

Subject: Wishing you well

How was the trip over? Have you started walking yet? Can you feel the pilgrims of old walking along with you? I hope the sun is shining on you and the trail is flat. Donna

Monday, May 16 5:42 PM

To: Maureen327@midnet.net, Donna121@midnet.net

From: Helen.morgia@southnet.com

Subject: Arrived, Hiking, All is Well

Sisters,

You gave me a good laugh with your e-mails to each other. Thanks for sharing. Guess I should have told you more about it myself.

I met Bert at Dulles with no trouble. Our checked baggage arrived just as it should. Getting to our starting point was relatively smooth and our accommodations there were quite grand. We have completed two days of hiking. Not all in sunshine and definitely not all flat. But keep the wishes for both coming, Donna. We hiked through more of the Pyrenees than we expected. Both days the trail traversed a couple of ridges as we moved down through the foothills. My Florida legs notice the uphills and Bert seems more to be bothered by the downhills. It is beautiful, really beautiful. Pamplona is an old walled city. We arrived in early afternoon and are enjoying it. Thanks for the good wishes. I'll write when I can.

Maureen, BTW, despite all the reassuring words, we did have to ford a stream and I have a picture to document it. But to be honest, we didn't have to carry our backpacks over our heads to keep them dry. I'll tell you about it sometime.

Helen the Hiker

Bert had received a few e-mail messages on his Blackberry, so he had no reason to review them at the

Internet café. Instead he composed a report to the task force while Helen had been reading and responding to her accumulated messages.

Monday, May 16 5:45 PM

To: team_task_force_alpha@doe.gov

From: bert_task_force_alpha@doe.gov

Subject: Camino Report #1

Dear Fellow Task Force Members

It has been good to see your e-mails on my Blackberry. I am glad to have it with me. I would feel cut off from you if I didn't have it along. Thanks for copying me on everything. Remember that I am perfectly ready to help with anything if you might need my input.

I promised I would be filling you in on our progress. I expected to be writing sooner. I could have used the Blackberry, but did not want to thumb type all this. We heard that Internet cafés are everywhere in Spain, but have not found that to be true. We had a bit of trouble finding this one.

We're now in Pamplona, for the second time. When we arrived in Madrid before the sun came up on the 14th, we caught an early express train to Pamplona and then immediately caught a bus to Roncesvalles, our starting point. This second arrival in Pamplona is for real. Our experiences have been unique, some stressful, all memorable, and only a few miserable.

Helen had reserved us rooms at a renovated monastery in Roncesvalles. I wanted to let you think that we stayed in medieval austerity, but just had to share the truth. You would be amazed by the

luxury of the place. I welcomed the comfort after the two days of travel and felt the jet lag melt away in the brief stay there. Talk about unique: I actually accompanied Helen to the Pilgrim Mass and Blessing that evening. I half-expected a lightning bolt to strike the church when God noted my presence, but She was kind and spared us, no doubt recognizing that I was mostly observing the other hikers gathered to be blessed and not pretending to really be a pilgrim myself.

Our hostel last night in Zubiri was okay in that we had a place that could accommodate 6 people all to ourselves. We thought after Roncesvalles we'd stay in albergues, with bunk beds and many people to a room. But the albergue was full and we lucked into finding the hostel. Its downside was that it is on the fifth floor (they call it the fourth, but it is really the fifth; the bottom floor is called the ground floor, and the first floor is the one above it), and we had to climb all those stairs after hiking up and down mountains all day. We didn't discover the real killer until later when we went out to get dinner. We found that the only place to eat in that bleak industrial town was closed for fumigation. I suppose if we had arrived the day before fumigation we could have gotten a meal, but who could guess what kind of critters we would be consuming with it? In the end we stopped in a tienda—a little corner store—bought some sausage, cheese, and wine, and trudging back up to our room, had a picnic dinner. Then it was time to collapse.

Our next adventure was exploring Pamplona. We arrived in early afternoon just as it began to rain. We rested over coffee in a sidewalk café on the main plaza for a while and when the sun returned went to find the place we planned to stay. Along the way, we spotted this Internet café and made a mental note of how to return to it later. Our hotel wasn't that hard to find if you knew where it was and how to get there, which we didn't. Our guidebook didn't help much and I suspect it may be poor for navigating in cities. Suffice it to say, I will not quickly

trust the book's city maps in the future. We have enjoyed walking through the city before dinner, despite our sore feet.

The way some people describe it, the Camino sounds like a stroll in the park. So far it hasn't resembled my concept of a stroll in the park, but I'm hoping things will change as we go along, and hoping that we will get to that part soon. Even Helen's usually sunny outlook has been stretched to its limit these first two days of hiking. She looked almost pitiful when we had to climb those five flights of stairs in Zubiri.

I've been thinking about all of you and hoping you're getting along all right, despite having one fewer person pulling an oar. Remember that I am in contact via Blackberry. So far I have had a strong signal everywhere we have been.

Tomorrow we are going to do a 14-mile day, with a significant ridge to summit. I thought we'd be walking only 10-mile or 12-mile days, but the Spanish do not always put their towns at exactly the right distance from each other. The distances have been a real test for our training and the training almost failed the test on Day 1. Day 2 has been better. We'll see if Day 3 puts us over the top into thinking a 14-miler is acceptable, or into thinking three days of Camino walking is enough and we'll spend the remainder of our time in Spain on a beach somewhere. At least it looks like there are several nice places to see along the way tomorrow. Helen says to say hello. Maybe you'll get to meet her someday, if we survive this trip.

Bert

BTW, all the distances here are measured in kilometers. To convert to miles, you multiply the kilometer measurement by 0.6. Maybe by the end of our walk, we'll be comfortable without converting.

To be continued...